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"We're OK ... How Are You?"

CPC 9/24/00

Thomas Michael Smith
Matthew 6:25-34

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This morning I begin to speak once again about stewardship. Holistically, stewardship has to do with time, talent and treasure, and so it does. But the part that tends to bother us is the treasure part. So, when the Church starts to talk about money, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? I *hope* the first thing is *discipleship*.

I don't want you to think about budgets. There will always be a budget, to be sure. But that is not our first concern. I don't want you to think about specific goals of specific program groups. There will be goals out there. You can count on it! But that is not our first concern. And I don't want to have you think first about your fair share of what it costs to operate the church. Surely, it does cost. You already know that.

The first thing I want you to think about, your first consideration, must be *discipleship*. That is, what does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ in relation to my financial resources?

Jesus said, "Strive first for the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33). Jesus told about three dozen parables of record in his teaching ministry. Of these, about *one-third* were on the subject of money or possessions. Since most of the parables were about the kingdom, it can safely be assumed that this particular text is at the center of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus said, "Strive first for the kingdom of God." He then provided more stories and counsel about money and possessions than almost any other single subject. "Jesus and the kingdom" is equivalent to "Jesus and money" in many ways.

Paul picks up on this theme in his letter to the Corinthian church. He addresses the subject of offerings in that congregation. He reminds them that another church - the one in Macedonia - has given liberally and generously, even though *they* are in financial hard times. But Paul makes the priority in their giving crystal clear: "First they gave themselves" (2 Corinthians 8:5).

So, an effective general budget campaign for the church is truly different. It's different in part because you and I are being made different. We are being *reconstructed*. By God. We are being *transformed.*

In the spirit of the text, I am *not* asking the question: "What is the budget for next year?" On many other occasions, and in every previous church, I had always been hard at work trying to put together the figures of the budget goals for the next fiscal year. I had always done this in order to know the goal toward which that church was striving. But I don't do that any longer. I haven't done that for five years now, since I've been at CPC. I no longer have a frenzied concern for this matter in the process of teaching stewardship. In fact, I *don't want to know* totals before we make our faith promise commitments in the Consecration Sunday worship service in four weeks.

I no longer try to get the various program areas to submit their budgets to me or to the Finance Committee early in the year. Youth ministry is a growing part of our church right

now, as is our Small Group ministry, and New Focus, and Missions, and the need to keep up with an aging church facility. What will their budgets be? In the past I fretted about these questions, but for the past five years I've not worried as much about it all.

In other years in previous congregations, I said to program committees: "Make out your budgets but don't expect too much. We may have to cut." Reminds me of something John Glenn said years ago as he orbited the earth for the first time. He was asked what he was thinking while speeding through outer space. He said, "I looked at all those fancy instruments and gauges, and remembered that they had all be supplied by the lowest bidder!"

No longer am I carefully calculating the percentage increase in the budget. I could always guess what that percentage increase might be. But I don't try to calculate it any more. And in the same way, I'm not so comfortable anymore with the familiar red barometer on the wall. No numbers goal toward which to strive, no red line indicating how far we have come - or haven't come, no data to give statistical encouragement (or discouragement) to the people.

And the reason for this relative lack of worry on my part is something we decided to do differently five years ago, and frankly, God has blessed this congregation since then. We decided that this church of Jesus Christ must <u>not</u> be budget-driven. Rather, by the grace of god, we must be Spirit-driven. We must consider the fundamental call of the Master: "Seek first the kingdom of God."

I am now absolutely convinced there is really no other way to run a financial stewardship campaign. We have been given a theological principle that is worthy of the church of Jesus Christ. We have a principle that is worthy in *every* local congregation. *Our goal is a spiritual goal*. First things first. "Seek first the kingdom of God."

Some people might say that this is really the same old thing in new clothes. I understand that kind of response. Each Halloween, parents make costumes for their children. My parents made costumes for me. Over the years, we had costumes in various themes: Looney Tunes, Batman, Peter Pan and Robin Hood. This year Ben has a choice - he can go out either as Thomas the Tank Engine or as a Tyrannasaours Rex. Last year he was Winnie the Pooh. Within a few years he'll have a bunch of choices. So, you might say, children and grandchildren have a whole wardrobe of clothes with which to play. They could interchange costumes freely. And some might say that, that's what all this talk about stewardship really is, just a change of costume.

If you were to say that, you'd be wrong. Because beginning five years ago, finance campaigns in this church of Jesus Christ began to deal with reordered priorities.

A friend of mine tells the story of a woman who came to his Midwest church several years ago. She said, "Pastor, I really love this time of year." He said, "You mean the fall colors and the crisp autumn air?"

She said, "No, that's not what I mean at all. I mean the stewardship campaign." The pastor responded, "You must be kidding. You actually like this time of year?"

"Yes," she said, "And I'll tell you why. This time of year makes me take stock of my life. It makes me think deeply about my priorities. It makes me ask if I am living the way God is calling me to live."

***That's* what needs to happen to us at least once each year. We think more deeply about our priorities. Am I living in accordance with the way of the kingdom of God? This is a time to center yourself anew upon the kingdom, and upon God. This is a time to put God at the center**

of your life once more. Stewardship is about your <u>faith</u> *long before* it's about your <u>money</u>.

I'm not just saying these things. We're not just skimming the surface. This isn't about simply going through the motions of signing a commitment card, and then back on our way.

A certain faithful pastor called on one of his members who had just had major surgery. The man was still in the recovery room of the hospital when the pastor arrived. His pastor took his hand: "Bill, I'm here. It's your pastor."

The man came only slightly awake, looked up, flashed a sign of recognition, and said, "Oh, yes, pastor. Well, just put me down for the same amount as last year." That's NOT what this is about. Hear me, please!

***Disciples* ought not to just turn in a card and run. Rather, each of us must ask: "God, what is *my* role as your disciple right now?" This financial campaign is about prayer -- any worthy financial campaign is a demonstration of the power of prayer in our lives.**

Each member of any group in our congregation, each member of our organized prayer chains, *everyone* must pray about the consecration of members on a daily basis. This is critical to our faithfulness. Everyone is asked to pray.

A woman came home from an art sale with a framed piece of art which read, "Prayer Changes Things." She liked it so well that she hung it over the mantle of the fireplace. A few days later, she noticed that it was missing. She asked her husband, "Do you know what happened to my new art piece over the fireplace?"

He replied, "Yes. I took it down." She shot back, "What's the matter with you? Don't you believe in prayer anymore?"

He said, "Oh yes. I do believe in prayer. I even believe that prayer changes things. I just happen not to like change!" Some of us are like that, I suppose. We don't pray, because we sense that God might indeed change our priorities! We'd be right to think this.

Let me tell you about the financial campaign of a church in another part of the country. It is a smaller congregation than ours, but because they were growing, they needed extra space. The space would be costly but absolutely necessary.

The pastor organized a financial campaign committee to try to raise money for the project. As the day of financial commitment began to draw near, he decided to send up a trial balloon. He asked the members of the steering committee to indicate anonymously on a small piece of paper what they hoped to give and to pass the pieces of paper around to him.

When the total was calculated, it was quite obvious that the church was not going to come even close to the necessary goal. The pastor turned to the committee and said, "We are going to need to go to prayer about this matter!" The members of the committee may have smiled indulgently, but he was very serious.

It was just four weeks until the campaign would call for the responses of the whole congregation. He instructed the committee, "I want each of you to commit yourselves to pray *daily* for this effort. Furthermore, I want you to contact two people from this congregation every day between now and commitment day, and pray with them. You may go to their homes, their places of work, or some other location. You may contact them by phone. But each of you is now asked to make that promise on behalf of this work we want to do."

When the day of commitment came in that church, the total amount pledged was *four times* the annual budget of that church. The people had prayed their way to an important and joyous victory.

All this has to do with the foundation of a strong church. If there were ever gimmicks at CPC, we don't do gimmicks any longer.

A pastor told his organist that he was going to ask those who would give $400 or more to the special fund drive to stand at the close of the service. He told the organist to play something appropriate. "What should I play?" she asked. His response was, "Play the Star Spangled Banner!"

That's a gimmick. Gimmicks are uniformly inappropriate and unworthy of the Gospel. The foundation of giving is in a people who are daily asking what it means to be faithful, what it means to grow and mature as disciples.

Notice the promise in Jesus' words: "Strive first for the kingdom ... *and all these things will be given you as well.*" What does this mean? It does <u>not</u> mean that our giving guarantees getting into heaven. It does <u>not</u> mean that we will have money dumped into our bank accounts if we give.

The prophet Malachi says that when we give, God will "open the windows of heaven" for us and pour down "an overflowing blessing" (3:10). And Jesus says that when we exercise a giving lifestyle, we will receive "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over ..." (Luke 6:38). But neither promise has to do with winning some kind of divine lottery.

Rather, if we give, there will be enough. If we are disciples in our giving, there will always be enough. That's the unalterable promise. Enough for the church ... and enough for our families.

No *excesses* are promised here - no fattened church coffers at the end of the year, no overflowing balances in our general account; rather, *an abundance of enough.* We will have enough for ourselves <u>*and*</u> enough for every good work. <u>That's</u> the promise.

Therefore, the church's efforts toward Christian giving are always about a whole lot more than any current financial campaign. We are not in a 100-yard dash. We are part of a cross country run that lasts a lifetime. The church's campaign is not an effort to squeeze as much as we can out of our members in the coming year. Rather, it's a campaign to find an increasing number of persons who really decide to give out of discipleship. Our motto is 'the need of the giver to give for his or her spiritual growth' - not the need of the church to receive, for its budget.

So, go to prayer. Don't just pray about what you will give. Pray about what it means for you to be a man or a woman of the Master. Seek *first* the kingdom of God in your life. Do this, and the church will do just fine, thank you. Do this, and we will have an abundance of enough for every good work. Seek first the kingdom, and <u>all other things</u> will be yours as well.

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